

Bright Star highlights benefits of joint exercises

By Anthony C. Zinni, Special to Stars and Stripes
European edition, Friday, October 23, 2009

To keep our borders safe, sometimes it is necessary to project power outside them. Afghanistan is the obvious example of this — the mission to ensure that Afghanistan does not once again become a breeding ground from which terrorists can attack America and the rest of the world is a complicated-but-necessary one.

But what is less noticed by the media is the other way in which America's armed forces interact in the Middle East and the Arab world — namely through training missions with key allies. If asked in what region does the U.S. military for 30 years hold its largest foreign training exercise, few people would guess the Middle East. Yet right now, we are seeing such an exercise with American forces taking place in the desert sands of Egypt.

Bright Star, as this exercise is called, takes place every two years and is a direct outcome of the 1979 Camp David Accords. For nearly three decades the U.S. and Egyptian militaries have worked together — a relationship that is highlighted and strengthened when our forces go to Egypt for Bright Star. These two weeks of training are now an invaluable part of U.S. Central Command's engagement strategy, dramatically improving our readiness and interoperability.

What began as small-unit training between the U.S. and Egyptian armies has grown into a joint/combined coalition, computer-aided command post exercise with tactical air, ground, naval and Special Forces components. The exercise now involves more than a dozen countries and usually includes more than 70,000 troops. But it is also a living embodiment of the peace that has existed for three decades between the U.S., Egypt and Israel.

The exercise is a two-way street: Our forces learn how to operate in desert conditions and are exposed to one of the world's great Arab cultures, and the Egyptians gain from our technical knowledge and the professionalization of our armed forces. As Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently put it, "We have benefited from the interaction with the Egyptian armed forces, one of the most professional and capable in the region."

Over the course of three decades, our engagement with Egypt has expanded into a number of other fields. Egypt's support was central to Arab participation in the first Gulf War. When U.S. forces withdrew from Somalia in 1993, Egyptian soldiers safeguarded the American troops. The country's willingness to keep the Suez Canal open to U.S. transit and to allow U.S. air operations have made our many missions in the Middle East possible. The Egyptian hospital at Bagram Air Field in Afghanistan sees more than 7,200 patients a month, significantly aiding our readiness. And Egyptian efforts to end the conflict in the Sudan through both peacekeeping operations and diplomacy are helping to destabilize radical elements that threaten the entire African continent.

Egypt benefits from U.S. military training and technical knowledge and an average of \$1.3 billion a year in military and security aid. Expertise and resources are constantly being exchanged. In the past year alone, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has taught Egyptian troops to use advanced equipment to find enemy tunnels used in illegal smuggling across its border with Gaza and significantly strengthened efforts to tighten border security.

Egypt and the U.S. share the goals of destabilizing radical elements through moderation and creating lasting peace among all nations in the region. Our dynamic defense relationship sends a broad signal of deterrence through partnership and shows the world we value having strong Arab allies.

We welcome the chance of training with allies whenever we can get it, anywhere in the world. U.S. foreign policy and military decisions constantly stretch and alter our relationships with our allies. The value of a partner who has remained steadfast and dependable through difficult periods in a critical part of the world cannot be overestimated. Through operations like Bright Star we learn the true value of our friendships with other nations and, for our military, this kind of exercise is a vital part of how we keep America safe from attack.

Anthony C. Zinni is a retired four-star general in the U.S. Marine Corps and a former commander in chief of U.S. Central Command.

The Livingston Group, LLC provides representation to the Government of the Arab Republic of Egypt.
More information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.